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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the role of cohesion in oral proficiency testing. This study analyzed the cohesion of oral reports given by 16 Cypriot high school students studying English as a foreign language (EFL) using a modification of M. A. K. Halliday and R. Hasan's rating scale. It then compared the objective cohesion ratings with impressionistic grades of cohesion assigned by three experienced raters. Although the results of the study were not conclusive, it was found that the only objective cohesive device that correlated with raters' grades for cohesion was the use of referential pronouns. The strengths and weaknesses of the objective rating scale are discussed. Seven appendixes reproduce models of communicative competence, test format, objective rating scales, data summaries and correlation matrixes. (MDM)

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THE ROLE OF COHESION IN COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AS EXEMPLIFIED IN ORAL PROFICIENCY TESTING

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Paper presentedat the 1994 Language Testing Research Colloquium, Washington D.C.

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Introduction

This paper investigates the role of cohesion in oral proficiency testing. The cohesion of sixteen oral reports was analyzed and compared with an impressionistic grade of cohesion assigned to the sixteen oral reports by three raters. The aim of the study is to see whether there is any correlation between the nature and frequency of occurrence of the various kinds of cohesive devices in each oral report and the average grade for cohesion that was given to each oral report by the three raters. The ultimate goal of this study is to check the validity of rating scales used in oral proficiency testing.

Communicative Competence

In the early seventies the foreign language teaching profession witnessed a shift in the methods of language teaching from the audiolingual method to a more integrated one. The new wave of interest, which is known as the communicative competence movement, has been characterized by the fact that language teachers and researchers have recognized that the mere knowledge of grammatical structures and vocabulary are not sufficient for meaningful, functional and interactive communication. Rather, the ability to successfully communicate in a foreign language depends upon a number of factors which interact with each other. However, even though it is broadly accepted that communicative competence goes beyond linguistic competence, there is no consensus as to what the components of the construct are.

There are various models of communicative competence among which the best known is the one proposed by Canale and Swain 1980 and Swain 1983. In their model Canale and Swain include four components, the first two focusing on the use of the linguistic system itself. Grammatical competence, component number one, encompasses "knowledge of lexical items and the rules of morphology, syntax, sentence grammar, semantics and phonology" (Canale and Swain, 1980: 29). Discourse competence, the second component, is the ability to connect sentences in order to form a meaningful unit made up of a number of utterances. What Canale and Swain are referring to in discourse competence is also known as cohesion and coherence.

The last two components pertain to the functional aspects of communication. Sociolinguistic competence, component three, is the knowledg e of the sociocultural rules of language and discourse. The fourth component, strategic competence, is described by Canale and Swain (1980: 30): "as the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or insufficient competence."

Another model of communicative competence which was proposed by Bachman 1987 bears many similarities to that of Canale and Swain (Appendix #1). Still there are significant differences between the two models, the most notable one concerning the role of strategic competence. Bachman acknowledges that strategic competence influences language performance but does not consider "strategic competence as solely an aspect of language competence" (Bachman 1990: 106). In his opinion, strategic competence is a more general ability we employ in both verbal and nonverbal tasks. In Bachman's model, strategic competence is included as a completely separate element. Bachman's organizational competence corresponds to Canale and Swain's grammatical and discourse competence. Also, Bachman expands Canale and Swain's notion of sociolinguistic competence to have wider connotations as a major element of pragmatic competence.

Cohesion

As seen in the models described above cohesion is an important element of communicative competence. Cohesion refers to surface structure linguistic means by which texture is created (Halliday and Hasan 1976: 4). Texture is a property of a language unit bigger than a sentence as opposed to a series of unrelated sentences. A text is a unit of language in use, a semantic unit. Therefore, when we are dealing with the cohesion of a text we are investigating the linguistic means which enable a text to function as a single meaningful unit.

The Data

This paper focuses on the role of cohesion in oral proficiency. More specifically, it looks

at the role of the three major categories of cohesive devices: lexical, referential and conjunction. Sixteen oral reports produced by an equivalent number of EFL students in Cyprus constitute the data for this study. The students were enrolled in the last year of study at both urban and rural high schools. By that time the students had had eight years of instruction in English as a foreign language. The reports are part of a multi-component test of oral proficiency. (Appendix #2) The other components were a group discussion, an oral interview and a role play. The students were given the choice of two topics to discuss and they were told that after the discussion each of them would have to report on the outcome of the discussion. The format of the test battery reflects research findings (Shohamy, 1986) indicating that different speech interactions produce different kinds of speech samples. For this study all analyzed reports were responses to a prompt on tourism in Cyprus (Appendix #3).

The rating scale chosen for the grading of the test battery is an adaptation of the one proposed by Bachman and Palmer 1983. This scale was chosen because it is based on a theory of language, namely communicative competence (Appendix #4). As mentioned already there have been two slight modifications to the scale. First, the students were not given a grade for the use of cultural references. Since we are dealing with an EFL and not an ESL setting, students should not be expected to be extensively familiar with the second language culture or at least this kind of knowledge or familiarity should not be subject to evaluation. Needless to say, American and British pop culture have become widespread among Cypriot youth.

The second change relates to register. As can be seen by the scale a new description for register was introduced for each battery component.

Speaker chose	**1**	inappropriate register
	2	appropriate register but used inconsistently
	3	appropriate register and used consistently

In the original scale students were graded for the evidence and control of both formal and informal registers. In the adopted scale we looked at whether the speaker chose the appropriate register for each task and used it consistently or not.

Procedure

The cohesion of each oral report was analyzed using the model proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976) (Appendix #5). The model for the analysis of cohesion operates according to the following principles. The basic concept utilized in analyzing the cohesion of a text is that of a ***tie***. A ***tie*** refers to the presence of a pair of cohesively related items. Therefore, a ***tie*** is a relational concept and also a directional one. The relation, however, is asymmetric. We differentiate between anaphoric and cataphoric relations. In the former case the presupposed element precedes the cohesive device whereas in the latter, the presupposed element follows the cohesive device. Anaphoric devices are by far more frequent in English. Another dichotomy in devices investigated is that of the endophoric/exophoric tie. An endophoric tie is a tie whose elements of the cohesive pair lie inside the text itself. An exophoric tie is a tie formed with one element of the pair inside the text and another outside the text, both within the context of the situation.

Another principle in the analysis of cohesion is that any sentence can have more than one tie in it. Additionally, ties can be classified into ***immediate***, ***mediate*** and ***remote***. ***Immediate*** ties are those in which the cohesive element is located in the adjacent sentence in which the presupposed item is embedded. A ***mediate*** tie is one in which the cohesive device is related to an item in a preceding sentence (but not in the immediately preceding one) through an item which could be a cohesive device itself, located in the preceding sentence. Finally, a ***remote*** tie is one in which the cohesive device is related to the presupposed item without the assistance of intermediate ties.

The model proposed by Halliday and Hassan may be described as follows. This model is developed to analyze but not quantify cohesion. The authors' taxonomy, however, does not

provide for a way to predict whether the presence of cohesive devices within a given text will result in cohesive discourse. One characterization of the cohesion was assigned to each text. A measure of the ***density*** of cohesive devices in each major category was obtained by dividing the number of cohesive devices belonging to one category, e.g. reference, by the number of relevant opportunities of occurrence. In the case of the cohesive category of reference the relevant opportunity of occurrence is noun phrases. The measure of cohesiveness was established according to the procedures described hereafter. The categories analyzed were reference, lexical and conjunction. Ellipsis and substitution will not be discussed because of the low density of tokens.

At first thought one would think that we could establish the density or frequency of cohesive devices in a given text by dividing the total number of cohesive devices by the number of sentences, clauses or words present. However, since each category of cohesive devices (RP, L and C) has different possibilities of occurrence we must establish the density of each particular category.

A cohesive tie consists of a cohesive item plus the presupposed item to which it refers. A cohesive tie between two clauses occurs when a conjunction links two clauses and establishes a relationship between them. Whenever we have two clauses it is possible to join them by using a conjunction. Therefore, the possible number of conjunctions in a text depends upon the number of clauses in the text. The following steps were taken to compile relevant data (Appendix #6):

1. The number of clauses, sentences, NPs and words and the cohesive types in each text were counted.

2. The frequency of occurrence of each of the main categories of cohesive devices was established. The number of cohesive devices from each category was divided by the number of possible occurrences. For example, since conjunctions can appear between clauses, the number of conjunctions found in a given text was divided by the total number of clauses in this text. By the same token, since lexical cohesion can hold between any two words, the number of lexical

cohesive ties was divided by the total number of words in each report. In the case of references the number of referential cohesive devices was divided by the number of NPs since pronouns, the major kind of referential device, need a presupposed noun phrase.

The data was analyzed using the model proposed by Halliday and Hasan (1976). Modifications to the original model include the following:

First, Halliday and Hasan use the sentence as their unit of analysis. In the interest of retaining more pertinent information I chose to use the clause as the unit of analysis. Other researchers dealing with cohesion, e.g. Almeida 1984, have chosen to use a T-unit for their analysis.

Second, Halliday and Hasan's cohesion model deals with English produced by native speakers. In my work with nonnative speakers it was often not possible to make use of the precise language uttered by the students, but rather it became necessary to infer what the intended utterance was likely to have been. Also when counting words, clauses and NPs I chose to exclude false starts and unnecessary repetition. Unnecessary repetition includes varieties where the speaker repeats a word or phrase in order to gain time. Also verbalized pauses such as *eh, uh*, even though they may appear in the transcript, were not included in the word count.

Third, Halliday and Hasan include distance of cohesive items in their analysis. Such a measure was not relevant to my study since I did not have an acceptable way to quantify the role of distance in assessing cohesiveness of the texts. The number of cohesive devices from each major category (reference, lexical and conjunction) was converted into a frequency and correlated with the average grade for cohesion given by the three raters.

While this model was designed to analyze cohesion in written discourse, I chose to use it to analyze spoken language. I believe that there is an overlap between the way cohesion in written discourse is created and the way cohesion in spoken discourse is created. However, there are differences between written and spoken discourses and, therefore, in the future a model of cohesion analysis of spoken text may need to be developed. The following are some of the

differences between written and spoken discourse which may pose a problem in analyzing cohesion. When judging the cohesion of a written text, decifering the written or typed word is seldom a problem. On the other hand, when judging the cohesion of a spoken discourse inaccurate pronunciation may interfere and distract us from focusing on cohesion and, therefore, our assessment may not be accurate. Long pauses in spoken language may also be a problem. If the pauses are too long then the rater may have difficulty in establishing a connection between the current sentence and the preceding sentence. If there is a long gap in the conversation raters may not know to whom a pronoun refers. In written text, long time gaps between sentence creation are irrelevant because ultimately the text appears contiguous on the page. Also in written discourse, mediate and remote cohesive ties are easy to establish because we can visualize the entire text. In spoken discourse, however, we cannot remember or visualize the entire text. Therefore, we may miss some less obvious cohesive ties. This can be circumvented by providing the rater with the transcript of the text. However, this is not advisable because when rating spoken language the rater should be allowed to listen to the tape only. Finally, another shortcoming of the model is that it does not take into account paralinguistic features such as intonation, pitch, etc. It can be the case that such features may be employed to mark cohesion in spoken language. This is something that researchers may want to look into further.

The next step was to correlate the grade assigned for cohesion (based on the analysis of cohesion) to the grade of cohesion assigned by the three raters who listened to the tapes and graded cohesion according to a scale. The overall grade for cohesion is the average of the three grades given by three different experienced raters.

Results and Discussion

Given the small amount of data, I decided to check the degree of interdependence by comparing each of the three categories of cohesion with the overall grade for oral proficiency using Spearman's correlation coefficient. Using the same test the degree of interdependence among the three major categories of cohesive devices was established. For an a=0.5 the only

significant correlation was between the number of referential items and the overall grade for cohesion. A similar test with Pearson's correlation coefficient yielded the same results. (Appendix #7) This implies that an increased number of referential ties could result in increased cohesive discourse. However, the results of the study were not conclusive. The indications yielded by the analysis and the statistics are not totally satisfactory. It could be the case that analyzing cohesion in spoken language may require a complementary model which will be more sensitive to features of spoken language, such as intonation and pitch. Also the measurement of cohesion should focus on the appropriateness of cohesive devices to the context and their distribution throughout the text.

These preliminary findings indicate that the use of pronouns may be of some importance in creating a cohesive text. Since the only cohesive device that correlates with the grade given for cohesion is the referential pronouns, this may be an indication that the rater's judgement about the cohesion of a text is influenced by the frequency of pronouns. If further study reveals similar results, the findings of this, along with the results of other relevant studies, could be including in the training for test raters. Test raters can be informed that paying attention to the nature and frequency of occurrence of cohesive devices may be a way to accurately make judgements about the cohesiveness of a text. Along the same lines, EFL instructors can share this finding with their students. Students can be informed that judgement of a test rater about the cohesiveness of a given text seems to be at least partially subject to the nature and frequency of occurrence of referential cohesive devices.

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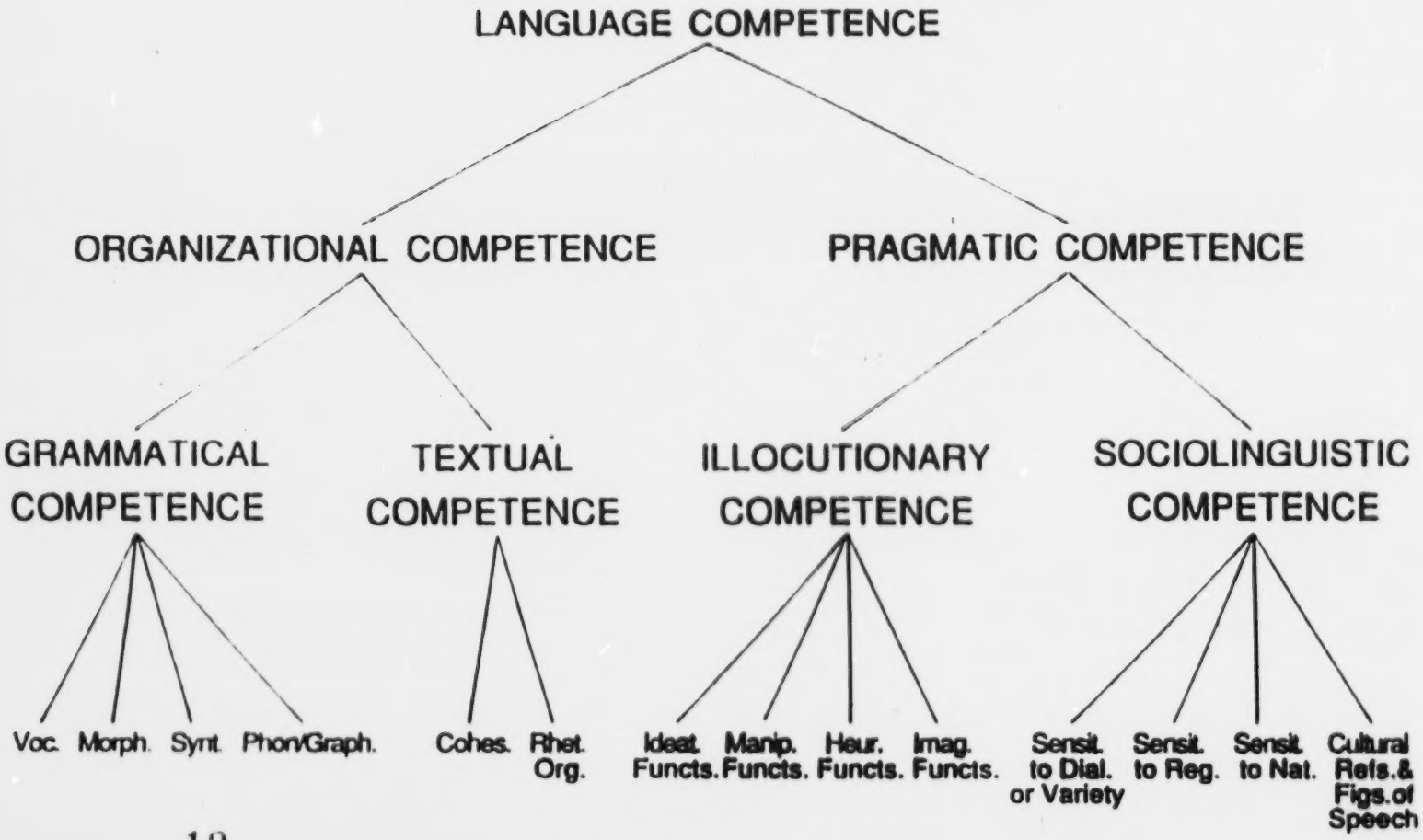
Appendix #1

Communicative language ability



Appendix #2

TEST FORMAT

A. Group Discussion
B. Oral Report
C. Oral Interview
D. Role Play

Appendix #3

GROUP DISCUSSION: 2-B

You and your friends have been asked to give a report on tourism in Cyprus to a group of visiting American high school students. Time is short so decide what is the most important information to talk about. Your friends may propose different information as more important than what you propose. Be ready to express your opinion, agree or disagree with your friends, and explain to them how your suggestions are better than theirs.

Here is what you think you should talk about in the report:

- The beach resorts of Ayia Napa and Protaras
    - beautiful beaches
    - big hotels
    - many sea sports
    - many bars and restaurants

GROUP: STUDENT:
SCHOOL:

GROUP DISCUSSION

GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE

a) range 1 2 3 4 5 6

b) accuracy 1 2 3 4 5 6

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

a) vocabulary 0 1 2 3 4

b) cohesion 0 1 2 3 4

SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

a) Register Speaker chose: 1 inappropriate register

2 appropriate register but used inconsistently

3 appropriate register and used consistently

b) Nativeness 0 1 2 3 4

ORAL REPORT

GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE

a) range 1 2 3 4 5 6

b) accuracy 1 2 3 4 5 6

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

a) vocabulary 0 1 2 3 4

b) cohesion 0 1 2 3 4

SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

a) Register Speaker chose: 1 inappropriate register

2 appropriate register but used inconsistently

3 appropriate register and used consistently

b) Nativeness 0 1 2 3 4

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INTERVIEW

GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE

a) range 1 2 3 4 5 6

b) accuracy 1 2 3 4 5 6

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

a) vocabulary 0 1 2 3 4

b) cohesion 0 1 2 3 4

SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

a) Register Speaker chose: 1 inappropriate register

2 appropriate register but used inconsistently

3 appropriate register and used consistently

b) Nativeness 0 1 2 3 4

ROLE PLAY

GRAMMATICAL COMPETENCE

a) range 1 2 3 4 5 6

b) accuracy 1 2 3 4 5 6

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE

a) vocabulary 0 1 2 3 4

b) cohesion 0 1 2 3 4

SOCIOLINGUISTIC COMPETENCE

a) Register Speaker chose: 1 inappropriate register

2 appropriate register but used inconsistently

3 appropriate register and used consistently

b) Nativeness 0 1 2 3 4

Comments on the test battery as a whole

Register 0 1 2 3 4

Examinee's pronunc.: a) impairs communic./understanding severely

b) impairs communic./underst. moderately

c) does not interfere with communication

d) near native; enchances communic./underst.

Appendix #4

SUBJECT: Male/Urban
Group 4, Student A

Appendix #5

Clause Number	*Number of Ties*	*Cohesive Item*	*Type*	*Presupposed Item*
1	1	I	Rp	speaker (sp)
2	0			
3	2	it	Rp	Cyprus
		country	L5	Cyprus
4	4	where	Rdpa	Cyprus
		tourists	L1a	tourist
		visit	L5	tourist
		it	Rp	Cyprus
5	2	but	C21ii	pc
		Cyprus	L1a	Cyprus
6	3	tourists	L1a	tourist
		customs	L5	society
		country	L5	Cyprus
7	4	this	Rdp	foreign customs
		affects	L1a	affect
		society	L5	customs
		its	Rps	Cyprus
8	4	but	C21ii	pc
		tourists	L1a	tourist
		its	Rps	tourist
		Cyprus	L1a	Cyprus
9	3	as	C15i	pc
		we	Rp	sg
		this year	L5	every year
10	1	we	Rp	we>sg
11	4	many tourists	L5	millions of tourists
		visit	L1a	visit
		our	Rps	we>sg
		country	L1a	country
12	3	they	Rp	tourists
		did	S21	visit Cyprus
		last few years	L5	every year
13	1	I	Rp	I>sp
14	2	and	C11i	pc
		this	Rdp	pc
15	2	which	Rprel	prices
		the Cyprus tourism org	L5	tourist
16	2	as	C15i	pc
		we	Rp	we>sg
17	2	last year	L5	every year
		Gulf War	L5	cause
18	2	that	Rdp	Gulf War
		tourists	L1a	tourist
19	4	and	C11i	pc
		they	Rp	airline ins. cos.
		Cyprus	L1a	Cyprus
		danger zone	L5	Gulf War

Appendix #6

SUMMARY OF DATA

Record	Male/ Female	Urban/ Rural	No. of Sent.	No. of Clause	No. of NPs	No. of Words	No. of CTs	No. of Ref.	Freq. Ref.	No. of Lex.	Freq. Lex.	No. of Conj.	Freq. Conj.
1	M	U	12	32	81	256	58	22	27	25	10	10	31
2	M	U	8	24	53	175	54	23	43	26	15	4	17
3	M	U	8	20	46	145	46	17	37	22	15	6	30
4	M	U	13	40	81	270	82	24	30	37	14	20	50
5	M	R	13	18	47	159	44	10	21	23	14	9	50
6	M	R	6	19	33	109	34	7	21	23	21	4	21
7	M	R	9	24	45	147	50	22	49	25	17	3	12
8	M	R	5	19	40	150	58	14	35	35	23	9	57
9	F	U	15	41	71	150	82	36	51	33	22	12	29
10	F	U	13	29	50	176	67	30	60	29	16	7	25
11	F	U	8	14	39	124	36	12	31	19	15	5	36
12	F	U	7	11	31	100	27	10	32	15	15	2	18
13	F	R	11	15	38	128	30	6	16	20	16	4	27
14	F	R	10	16	32	116	30	5	16	24	21	1	6
15	F	R	11	17	47	155	37	16	34	16	10	5	29
16	F	R	10	17	36	121	46	19	53	21	17	6	35

Appendix #7 : Correlations between frequencies of cohesive devices and overall grade for cohesion

Spearman Correlation Coefficient

MATRIX OF SPEARMAN CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS

	REFE	LEXI	CONJ	Overall Cohesion
REFE	1.000			
LEXI	0.214	1.000		
CONJ	-0.039	-0.172	1.000	
Overall Cohesion	0.573	-0.088	0.008	1.000

Number of Observations: 16

PEARSON CORRELATION MATRIX

	REFE	LEXI	CONJ	Overall Cohesion
REFE	1.000			
LEXI	0.113	1.000		
CONJ	-0.065	-0.050	1.000	
Overall Cohesion	0.552	-0.153	0.033	1.000

Number of Observations: 16